"I was very creeped out and my heart was racing"

FEAR IN FRONT OF THE SCREEN − RETROSPECTIVE VIEW OF CHILDHOOD TV EXPERIENCES

Sabrina Unterstell/Amelie Müller

In an international study, 631 students from 8 countries recalled childhood TV experiences that had scared them.

"I cannot think of that scene without feeling sick. After watching that movie, I had to sleep in my parents' bed for years and was sick for the entire week following the movie." This is how 23-year-old Charlotte from Canada describes her feelings after seeing the final scene from *Hannibal* at the age of 10: "Anthony Hopkins' character extracts a part of the detective's brain, fries it up and then feeds it to him while the detective is still alive."

Charlotte is one of 631 students who, between April 2013 and January 2014, filled out a questionnaire about their experiences of fear while watching television as children. The study participants[1] drew a picture illustrating a frightening TV experience in their childhood, explained what exactly had frightened them, and described their experience during and after viewing.

WHAT CHILDREN GET TO SEE WORLDWIDE

Being scared while watching television is something children all over the world experience: nearly all the respondents could remember a frightening TV experience from their childhood, and could describe it in detail, along with its effects. The German participants deviate slightly from the norm: 9 of the 153
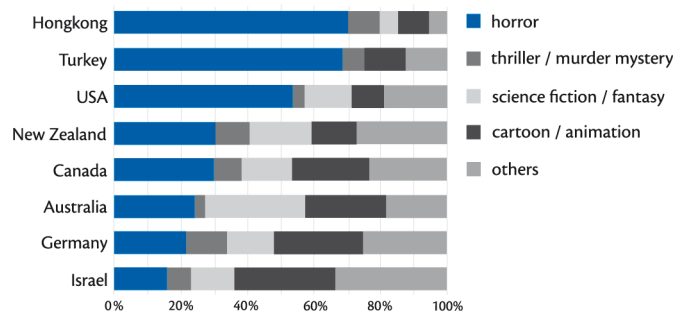
respondents stated that they had not experienced fear while watching television, because their choice of programmes was strictly

Ill. 1: Genres of fear-inducing programmes, inter-country comparison

monitored by their parents. This hints at a tendency which is confirmed when we look at the programmes mentioned in relation to the experiences of fear. Here we can see that what children get to see at what age differs considerably from one country to the next.[2]

In Hong Kong, Turkey and the USA, more than half of the frightening TV experiences are related to horror films. This is considerably more horror than in other countries (cf. Ill. 1).

Students from the other countries are much more likely to situate the programmes that scared them in other genres, even if horror still makes up at least one fifth (except in Israel, with 16 % horror).

In Israel, Germany, Canada and Australia, the proportion of animated formats (these are almost entirely made up of children's programming) is considerably higher than in the other countries. Furthermore, in these countries and in New Zealand, the programmes associated with the experience of fear were much more often assessed as age-appropriate than in Hong Kong, Turkey

and the USA, where the shows were mainly classed as adult programming. So there are substantial differences in what the respondents saw as children, and yet they were all scared. The crucial thing here is that fear comes in different forms: the experiences of fear described differ considerably both in the intensity of the emotion while watching and in the feelings that extend beyond the viewing. These range from fear that dissipated immediately after viewing to years spent dealing with the events in the film. Some students report long-lasting changes in behaviour. Others are pursued by the memory during the day: "I will always look around to see whether there is someone hiding to kill me," and many talk of sleep problems and recurring nightmares.

Programmes that are not age-appropriate leave stronger impressions than child-appropriate programmes. Thus monitoring children's choice of programmes can reduce profound experiences of fear among children while watching television. The study suggests that there are (or were, around 10 to 20

years ago, when the respondents were children) major country-specific differences in what children see/are allowed to see, and in the extent to which they face a correspondingly greater risk of experiencing profound fear.

WHY TELEVISION IS FRIGHTENING

Previous studies have shown that television content can trigger fears (e.g. Cantor, 2003), and that these fears can sometimes lead to long-lasting reactions (e.g. Harrison & Cantor, 1999; Holler & Bachmann, 2009).

How can these fears be explained, given that the viewer is in a risk-free situation when watching television?

This is linked to the fact that fear has an important warning function, and therefore arises immediately in a situation that is judged to be dangerous. It gives the signal for us to activate physical functions as protective mechanisms, in order to defend our boundaries (Glasenapp, 2013, p. 134f.). We judge a situation to be dangerous when we perceive certain cues pointing to a possible threat (LeDoux, 2001). And this is the reason why fear arises even when we are watching television: the media cues match the real cues, and can therefore also activate our warning system. Media thus have a dummy function ("Attrappencharakter", Schwender, 2006) and allow us to experience an "as if" emotion (Früh, 2003, p. 46). In other words, we experience similar feelings to those we would feel in a comparable situation in real life, but in an attenuated form.

A further factor is that as viewers we develop a relationship to what is shown, primarily to the characters on the screen (Mikos, 2008). This relationship is also crucial in determining what emotions we feel during specific scenes, and how much we are able to distance ourselves from the on-screen events (Unterstell & Müller in this issue). Someone who empathises strongly with a character experiences more fear when something bad happens to this character than someone who distances him-/herself from the character. Someone whose basic attitude towards television is one of distance, and who remains more conscious that these media events do not affect real life, will be less shaken by the tragic nature of the events than others, for whom the boundary between television and reality is more blurred. This point is especially important with regard to children, because emotional distance when watching television depends in part on the age and media experience of the viewer. The younger children are, the less capable they are of distancing themselves from what they are seeing, and classifying and processing it accordingly.

Which specific scenes frighten the individual viewer depends on various factors that influence the distance of the viewer to the on-screen events. But all these scenes, however different they are, contain the same basic fear-inspiring elements, regardless of country, gender and age.

THINGS THAT SCARE CHILDREN WHEN WATCHING TV

On the basis of what the respondents emphasise as frightening elements in their descriptions, 3 overall areas emerge: fear arises when children see who or what can cause injury, when children see that someone has been or is being injured, and when situations suggest that someone is particularly vulnerable and defenceless.

Creatures that exude danger

Threatening creatures are a particularly frequent source of fear for children watching television. Children are afraid of these creatures because their actions and/or appearance make them seem dangerous. In some cases they also seem intimidating because they have supernatural abilities giving them special power.

The acts of these creatures are frightening because they harm or seek to harm others: they lie in wait, pursue, abduct, injure, kill. The intentions and strategies of these creatures vary and determine the degree of fear felt: it makes a difference whether we see wicked mice fighting with dolls in *The Nutcracker*, or Pennywise, the clown from *Stephen King's IT*, torturing and murdering small children.

On the one hand, the appearance of some creatures is frightening because it often differs from what children are used to: the witch's green skin colour in *The Wizard of Oz*, the ugly aliens from *Men in Black*, Jigsaw with his strange mask in the movie *Saw*, or the Spider Baby from *Toy Story*: a one-eyed baby's head on spider legs. On the other hand, the appearance of some creatures shows the injuries they can inflict on others, because parts of their bodies are weapons, such as Freddy Krueger's knife hand. Creatures can also cause fear by the power they embody: the size of the great white shark makes it seem overpowering. The details respondents remember as frightening often include facial expressions, particular gestures of the creatures, or their voices. 25-year-old Paula from Germany remembers the terrifying smile of the witch from *Snow White: A Tale Of Terror* (cf. Ill. 2 and 3), Teresa from the USA found Freddy Krueger's gaze and his voice particularly frightening: "What frightened me the most is the way he would glare/stare at his victims." This quote makes it clear that fear also arises from the representation of the villain in relation to the victim. Freddy's gaze shows his enjoyment of torture. Fixed, evil stares can also indicate that the tormentors are about to attack others. This is expressed by Samara, the murderess from *The Ring*: at the moment when she sets out to kill again, her slightly protuberant, staring eye is shown in close-up (cf. Ill. 4 and 5). The appearance of frightening creatures usually leaves a strong impression within a very short space of time: a few seconds are enough to profoundly

Ill. 2 and 3: The bad witch with the green apple, drawing by 25-year-old Paula from Germany

terrify children, and the images often remain in their minds for a long time. It can be particularly problematic for children if they lose "safe places" because these become connoted with fear due to particular creatures. Several students, for example, recall how shocking it was for them that the doll Chucky (*Child's Play*) became a murderer: "It made me scared because he was supposed to have been a friendly doll" (Kylie, age 23, USA, saw the movie at age 9). The fear is exacerbated by the realisation that even trusted companions can be evil.[3] Characters which give children security should therefore not be associated with fear, otherwise they will come to feel that they are not safe anywhere.

When someone is in danger

Situations where characters face a threat can be frightening. Respondents frequently mention fight scenes, chases, or scenes where someone is trapped in a precarious situation, e.g. imprisoned – though the details vary considerably. Jessie (age 19, Australia) was scared, at age 4, that the young lion Simba (*The Lion King*) might be killed in battle. Rachel from New Zealand saw the film *When a stranger calls* at the age of 14, and found it frightening: "A young teenage girl babysitting 2 minors in a very open mansion at night. Someone anonymous called and frightened her. She was looking out of the windows into the night. A stranger reveals she is in the home." What these scenes have in common is that fear arises from uncertainty about whether the situations will end

well. It is possible to play around with this uncertainty, by presenting a situation as if the character concerned had no hope of escape, or by hinting to the viewer that the situation will end well. A threat can be drawn out endlessly, keeping the viewer in suspense for a long period of time, or it can be quickly resolved, thus relieving the tension. The mood of the characters involved also has an impact on the way viewers feel, since "fear is contagious" (Glasenapp, 2013, p. 135).

In cases where the tension in such scenes remains bearable, and the positive outcome eventually happens, this kind of narrative offers an opportunity: if the hero or heroine survives the adventure unharmed, this can show children that it is possible to cope with difficult situations and thus give them courage (Rogge, 2007).

Real dangers

Non-fictional programmes dealing with real dangers were comparatively

seldom described as frightening. Clearly the forms of representation used in fictional formats leave more lasting impressions than reports of real events or threats. Of all the real events mentioned in connection with fear, however, one is most prominent: the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City in 2001. Here the fear was mainly based on the fact that this made children aware of a possible danger that they had never previously considered.

Serious physical injuries

It is not only the threat that someone might be hurt that scares viewers. It is also frightening to see the images of the injuries themselves, i.e. to see the cruelty that can be inflicted on living beings. Representations of serious physical injuries were remembered as scenes of fear: torture and pain, decapitation, mutilation or execution; seeing somebody being eaten, fighting, penetration of the body (e.g. by aliens taking possession of the body) and pictures of dead bodies. Scenes showing how the injury is inflicted have a particularly shocking effect: "Watching the shower-scene from *Psycho* (…) TERRIFIED ME as a child. I remember this as the first time I seriously contemplated what that kind of pain would feel like," says 23-year-old Tom (USA, watched the movie at age 7, cf. Ill. 6 and 7) and imagines the suffering of the woman who is repeatedly stabbed. Here it becomes clear not only that children get scared because the television content reminds them
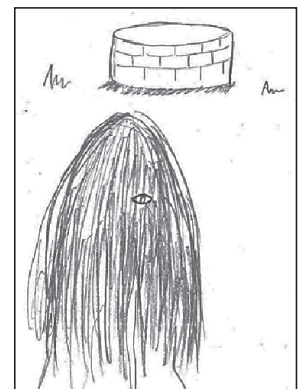
Ill. 4 and 5: The ghost Samara gets out of the well, drawing by 21-year-old Jin from Hong Kong
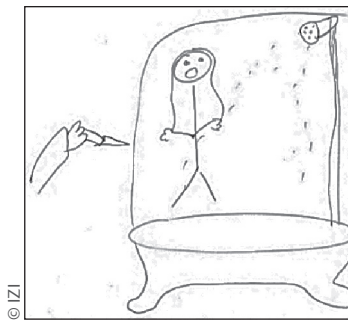
Ill. 6 and 7: A woman getting killed in the shower, drawing by 23-year-old Tom from the USA

of their own vulnerability, but that it is often television that first provides them with images showing the extent of possible suffering.

Situations which create insecurity

There are also scenes which do not actually contain any specific threat, and nonetheless cause unease: they show, for example, isolated places such as forests, in darkness or fog, cut off from others. The atmosphere is intensified by unknown noises, diffuse light and shadow, or the sudden appearance of something unfamiliar. These scenes point to situations in which we perceive our boundaries as vulnerable, as exposed to potential attacks, because we lack the resources to protect ourselves: darkness limits our vision, isolation suggests that nobody can come to our aid, we may not be able to react fast enough to something that happens suddenly, sleep prevents us from being ready to react etc. These scenarios of defencelessness make us insecure, and this leads to fear. Often the situations which scare children in films are those that they have already experienced as frightening in everyday life, e.g. being alone in the darkness.

THE RECIPE FOR FEAR

The individual elements of fear cover a huge spectrum. For example, every frightening creature has its specific characteristics. Each fear-inspiring element can be taken to its extreme, and it is possible to combine various qualities, each of which is terrifying on its own. The result would be a creature that looks particularly repulsive, has instruments with which it can cruelly mistreat others, enjoys inflicting pain, is invincible, and possibly even has superhuman powers, making it superior to its victims at all times.

The fear can be intensified even further, however, by a combination of fear-inspiring elements, and by the way the scenes are presented: for instance, what accompanying music is used (cf. Götz in this issue) and how they are integrated into the story.

It would be possible, for example, to depict how the creature described above brutally injures another character, showing the victim's pain and fear with particular vividness. Macabre music plays. The events take place in a spooky setting, and the story so far has established the victim as a central character for viewers to relate to, encouraging an attitude of empathy. Such a scene will make an even stronger impression on most people than the mere representation of the creature. Thus fear when watching television is produced by certain ingredients, which only develop their full strength when appropriately mixed.

Great care should be taken both in the selection and in the design of programmes when deciding what dose of these ingredients should be given to children. Children need, at all times, certainty that things will end well, in order to experience fear in a positive way when watching television (cf. Unterstell & Müller in this issue). If this is present, the experience can give children strength: they can see how the characters whose story they are involved in cope with dangers and challenges. ■

NOTES

[1] Cf. details on international partners involved in the study in the article about thrill of Unterstell & Müller in this issue.

[2] Since this was a qualitative study, the samples are not representative. The results, however, show tendencies, especially in countries with large numbers of cases such as the USA (n=179) and Germany (n=153).

[3] Soft toys and dolls, for example, have a special importance as trusted companions (cf. Holler & Götz, 2011).

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THE AUTHORS

Sabrina Unterstell, M.A., is a scientific editor at the Prix Jeunesse Foundation, Munich, Germany.
Amelie Müller, Dipl.-Psych., is part of the freelance staff at IZI, Munich, Germany.